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ABSTRACT

This document discusses the role of school personnel in identifying and referring students with chemical health problems. It introduces the topic by stating that school personnel should be aware of how to deal with students who have violated school rules and those who are seeking help. It states that they should know how to draw the line concerning acceptable behavior, how to assist students who feel they need help, and how to be positive role models. In cases of disciplinary action it is recommended that if the staff member has reasonable basis to suspect a student of possession, use, or selling a prohibited substance to another student, the staff member should take immediate action to secure the health and safety of the students, obtain the substance through appropriate search and seizure procedures, and report the student immediately. A list of "red flag" behaviors for use in identifying students for voluntary chemical dependency assistance programs is provided. This list includes such behaviors as laughing continuously; sleeping in class; temper outbursts; and a change in friends, activities, dress and/or attitude. A four-step process on how to break down external and internal blocks to identification of students is described: (1) observe the student; (2) discuss the behaviors that are of concern; (3) consult with a professional to check out perceptions; and (4) meet with the student and make referral. Two identification simulation exercises for teachers and students are provided. (ABL)

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IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WITH CHEMICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS
BACKGROUND AND SIMULATION

DIVISION OF ALCOHOL AND DRUG EDUCATION SERVICES
BUREAU OF INSTRUCTION
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL SERVICES
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BACKGROUND

Role of School Personnel in A Chemical Dependency Assistance Program

The school personnel should be aware of how to deal with students who have violated school rules and those who are seeking help. They should know how to draw the line about acceptable behavior and how to assist students who they feel may need help. They also need to be positive role models for students by being willing to talk about chemical dependency issues and support chemical-free activities.

Disciplinary Action: Drawing the Line

In disciplinary action, the staff member is drawing the line about unacceptable behavior that has been witnessed. If the staff member has reasonable basis to suspect any student of possession, use or selling another student a prohibited substance, he/she should:

1. take whatever immediate action may be necessary to secure the health and safety of the student (s);

2. if possible, using appropriate search and seizure procedures, obtain the alleged prohibited substance(s);

3. report the student immediately to the proper administrator.

Voluntary Referral: The Identification Process

The goal of a chemical dependency assistance program is to increase the number of voluntary referrals and reduce the number of disciplinary actions which are time consuming and adversary.

If the staff member identifies a student whose unusual behavior suggests that he/she is having an alcohol or other drug problem, the staff member should refer the student to a member of the school's student assistance team. This early identification process is the way a school can assist a student before disciplinary action is necessary. The staff member refers a student when the staff member first feels that something is wrong or out of the ordinary with the student. The staff member may have identified some of these "red flag" behaviors:

- hyperactive when normally quiet
- withdrawn when normally outgoing
- laughing continuously
- unable to focus on topic or activity
- sleeping in class
- temper outbursts
- drop in grades
- change in friends, activities, dress and/or attitude

Breaking Down External and Internal Blocks to Identification

To make identification safe, the staff member must know and trust how to make a referral and trust his/her own judgment, which is often the greatest block to identification. The administration can build trust in the referral by informing staff about the chemical health policies and procedures and by developing a student assistance team to deal with students who have chemical health problems.

Staff members can gain confidence in making identifications by confronting some common misunderstandings that they have about identification. Some teachers believe that they have to have "hard evidence" and clear facts to refer a student. They only need hard evidence when they are taking disciplinary action. For a voluntary referral, they only need to have a concern about the student.

Some teachers believe that what they see is not as bad as it could be. They minimize what they have observed or discount it by rationalizing, "all kids experiment when they are young." They may feel that referring a student for help is none of their business. The observation of a school bus driver, however, may be just the data that an administrator needs to confirm that the student has a problem.

Some staff worry that if they refer a student, it will jeopardize their relationship with a student or even put them in personal jeopardy. In some cases, staff members need to be careful and make confidential referrals to protect themselves. But, since students are not being faced with disciplinary action, they are not usually angered with those who make early identifications. Students will be merely asked to fill out a "non-clinical" assessment form and break the "no talk" rule about chemical use. With many students, especially elementary students, the problem may be with another person in the student's life. An early identification can open the door to those who previously waited until their personal problems were so severe that they acted out or dropped out to call attention to themselves.

The Identification Process

The actual process of identification involves several steps:

1. observe the student,
2. discuss the behaviors that are of concern,
3. consult with a professional to check out your perceptions,
4. meet with the student and make referral.

The identification is a process that may take four or five encounters to break through the student's wall of defenses. The staff person is merely drawing the line, stating what he/she sees and what is not acceptable, how much he/she is concerned and who he/she wants the student to see. The goal of the identification is to build trust, to show concern, to acknowledge resistance and to encourage the student to seek help. The staff member describes the behavior as he/she sees it, and lets the student know that he/she wants someone who is qualified to talk with the student. It is not necessary to mention that chemical use and/or abuse are in question.

By taking the risk of identifying students as soon as the symptoms emerge, staff members open the door for students to get the help they need before disciplinary action is necessary.

SIMULATION OF IDENTIFICATION

Method: Participants discuss how they would assist and/or discipline the student in the case identification simulation, based on their present policy. Before doing the case example, the partners will discuss who will be the student and who will be the teacher. The student will then read the handout entitled "Student Role" and the teacher will read the handout "Athletic Director/Coach/Teacher." The teacher will then discuss his/her concern with the student, based on what he/she knows. The student can respond as he/she chooses, based on his/her knowledge.

IDENTIFICATION SIMULATION

Athletic Director/Coach/Teacher

Your role is to be yourself as a concerned person. You may define yourself as an athletic director, coach, or teacher.

This is the first time you are talking to the student about the relation of his/her school performance and the use and/or abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Remember that he/she does not know about your concerns. Your task is to open up the discussion and break the "no talk" rule.

All you need to know in advance is that you have seen a drop in his/her academic performance and that several other teachers have noted a change in the student. You have decided to talk with the student because you are concerned about what you see.

Brief Description of the Situation:

Here is a brief description of the student's behavior which you know about or have observed. The student's grades have dropped in a number of classes, including yours if you are a teacher. You have observed the student hanging around the "druggies" of the school. You have noticed that the student is moody in class -- displaying more withdrawn behavior and acting more irritable than previously. He/she had a fight recently. You have heard from other teachers that the student sometimes has been overheard bragging about weekend parties.

List the things that you consider to be the most important for you to provide your partner -- this student -- in this contract.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

List three things that cause you concern as you meet with the student. These concerns can be your own apprehensions or your concerns for the student.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Elementary

IDENTIFICATION SIMULATION

Student Role

You are thirteen years old. You are the youngest child in your family. Your older brother is a heavy alcohol and drug user. He has asked you to use with him for four years. You like to use with him since it makes you feel grown-up. He treats you just like you are one of his friends.

Lately, your grades have dropped and you have come into school stoned. In an attempt to imitate your older brother, you have given your friends some dope to smoke. However, no one has caught you.

Your parents work, but, in the last few years, they have been unhappy with their work and their marriage. Your father works the night shift and you rarely see him. Your mom is home in time to make dinner, but has little time to spend with you.

You are aware that people--especially teachers--are angry with you lately. But you don't seem to understand what their problem is. It seems everyone hassles you. "Why don't they just leave you alone?" you keep asking yourself.

WORKSHEET FOR IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

I. Setting the stage and opening up discussion.

II. Building an alliance.

- supportive, yet concerned

III. Naming your concern.

- use of "I" message formula -- i.e., I am concerned because I observed _____ (behavior) on _____, _____ (occasion or time frame) and would like us to talk about the _____ (consequence).

IV. Planning to follow-up referral.

V. Checking back

- note positive changes
- reaffirm support
- reiterate concerns

VI. Giving student feedback on your observations.